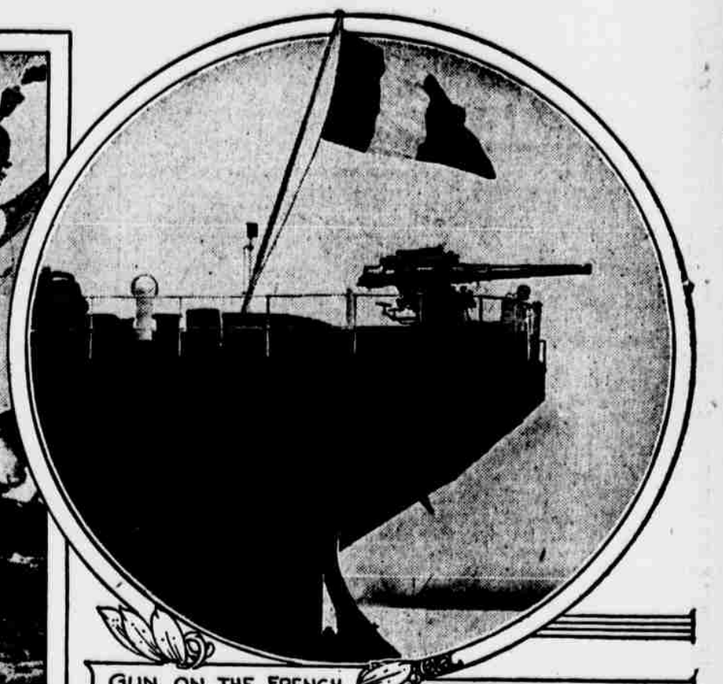
YANKEE SHIPS ONCE CARRIED GUNS AND USED THEM WELL

OLD EAST INDIA MERCHANTMAN, PAINTED TO RESEMBLE FRIGATE OF WAR

"CONQUEST OF THE SEA" FIGHT BETWEEN GALLEON AND SEA ROVER. From a Painting by C. M. Padday



GUN ON THE FRENCH FREIGHTER GUYANE THAT SANK U BOAT.

There Was No Question Then of Right to Arm and in 1819 Congress Gave Its Approval to the Fighting Merchantman

American Gunners, Expert With the "Long Tom," Were Ready and Able to Defend Their Vessels Against Pirate or Privateer

By JOHN WALKER HARRINGTON

GLORIOUS traditions drift unbidden into the port of memory at the thought of arming the American merchant marine.

Salem has sung her last chanty; gray old Nantucket dozes in the Atlantic surge; and yet it was not so long ago that the hardy sons of the seas who manned our argosies of peace cheered as they trained the "Long Tom" on the corsair and sprang joyously to their work at the command "Out cutlasses and board!"

Before the American navy was, our merchant fleet was well able to take care of itself. It needed no convoys; it recked little of filibusters in Congress; of buccaneers on the Spanish main; nor of the pirates of the Barbary coast. Hundreds of trade vessels left our harbors with armaments as powerful often as those of men-of-war and with gunners ready and willing to send the "low rakish craft" to the bottom the moment she hoisted the black flag. Often they encountered hostile privateers or answered broadside for broadside, the fire of enemy frigates.

The world had come to believe that the days of piracy were no more. Blackbeard and Capt. Kidd became mere symbols wherewith to kindle the fancy of youth. The cruelty and blood lust of the freebooters of the high seas were merged with stories of old romance. And now comes the cry against a Prussian piracy whose jolly roger floats from rovers of the underseas. The cutthroats against which the American clipper captains fought sometimes made the recalcitrant walk the plank; the German submarines, albeit their commanders carry commissions with the eagle's stamp, destroy all vessels whether those of enemies or of neutrals, regardless of the safety of passengers and crews. It matters not that under the code of nations these vessels are on their lawful occasions. International law depends for its being on the consensus of civilization. Before August, 1914, it had been accepted by all to whom civilization was not veneer that the slaying of non-combatants in cold blood and the destruction of a vessel without warning was a violation of the rights of mankind.

The word piracy is one often applied in time of war. The British denounced the captains of the ships of the American colonists as pirates because they did not recognize the Government which gave to them letters of marque and reprisal. In the civil war the Alabama was classified as a corsair by the Federal authorities because they could not consider the Southern Confederacy as constituting a nation.

Chief Justice Kent defined piracy as depredations on the high seas without authority from any sovereign. The original purpose of piracy was gain, although it can be undertaken for wanton bloodthirstiness or revenge. Piracy may be guided by a spirit of universal hostility to rights of humanity. In many quarters the operations of the German U-boats are therefore held to be as piratical as though they were committed by Morgan or other unworthies who harassed the golden galleons of Spain. Women and children met hard fates from the sea wolves of the eighteenth century; they are slain ruthlessly in the twentieth when passenger liners are torpedoed in dead of night.

"The German Government," says Archibald R. Watson in a recent letter to THE SUN, "has notified our nation that American merchant vessels navigating the high seas are to be destroyed without warning. That such an act would be in the nature of piracy as that offence is understood and condemned among nations does not admit of doubt. That the owners of our merchant ships may lawfully resist such an act of unauthorized aggression is equally unquestionable."

Hence he favors the merchants arming their ships, and suggests that the President employ as many armed vessels as needed for convoying the mercantile fleet.

The present laws with regard to the arming of merchantmen grew out of the common practice of American vessel owners. Long before any permissive statute was thought of the hardy skippers were taking artillery to sea. They were defending "piratical aggression" in their own way and doing it ably. The now much discussed section of our national law was enacted in 1819 rather to define a course than to protect the commerce of the United States against the crime of piracy. "The commander and crew of any merchant vessel of the United States," to quote the passage (section 4205, Revised Statutes), "owned wholly or in part by a citizen thereof, may oppose and defend any aggression, search, restraint, depredation or seizure which may be attempted upon such vessel so owned by the commander or crew of any armed vessel whatsoever, not being an armed vessel of some nation in amity with the United States."

Although the United States is ostensibly in amity with Germany, the old statute could hardly be construed as meaning that Teutonic submarines have license to destroy American vessels and slay all on board. The merchantmen of old had for years been doling out death to bare legged Algerians and tinsel clad buccaneers. The last words of the statute were meant only to deter them from embarking on a career of private conquest or opening fire upon a vessel belonging to a friendly Power. As under the new interpretation of frightfulness the sight of a periscope would be interpreted to mean that the submarine was coming not for "search, nor depredation, nor for seizure," but to sink and kill, the question as to which vessel fired first might not be long mooted.

George W. Wickersham, former Attorney-General of the United States, has recently declared his belief that the statutes and the court decisions uphold the rights of the American merchant ships to carry guns for defence. He goes back to a decision of Judge Bee given in 1795 in the United States District Court of South Carolina as follows:

"The laws of neutrality and nations in no instance that I know of interdict neutral vessels from going to sea armed for defensive war. All American Indiamen are armed and it is necessary that they should be."

The very words "American Indiamen" bring visions of stately vessels which under a great press of canvas went forth to trade with all the world. Col. Theodore Roosevelt, in his history of the war of 1812, pays tribute to the courage and the resourcefulness of the captains of those craft, who, he says, needed no protection other than that of their own guns.

When the American merchant marine was coming into its perfect flower the world was infested by pirates. Perhaps that was not an unmixed curse, for it did much to develop the shipping interests of the young nation. The skippers from way down East were an adventurous tribe and their crews were recruited from a hardy and fearless race.

There were pirates in plenty for them to meet. Ever since the Spanish conquistadores brought the wealth of Peru to the Isthmus for transportation to Spain buccaneers had infested the Spanish Main. The word filibuster is a Hispanic version of the English term freebooter. There were filibusters in those days to delay commerce at every turn. The distant coasts of Africa had swarms of pirates, and the gentry also collected at a rendezvous on the Island of Madagascar. The fact that seafaring had many perils and that many a ship would never come back again sent up the rates for ocean freight to good, round figures.

The merchant princes of this city, of Boston and old Salem in Massachusetts took long chances. Lloyd's was not in their reckoning. They carried their own insurance and charged enough profit to make good their losses. The courage of the American sailor at the end of the eighteenth century was a product of conditions. The fashion of the times prescribed that trade vessels should go armed. Americans were following the lead of the Spanish, who sent their galleons with tier on tier of carronades, and of the British, whose Indiamen ran the perils of Malay krises and of Moorish pillage. Often an ordinary packet ship would have batteries like those of a frigate.

The Yankee clippers of the old days were not so heavily munitioned as the English craft, but they were so handled that their armament was often more effective. They generally carried a long, heavy gun amidships which could be swung in any direction by tackle. It was elevated by a coign, although of course the elaborate science of the trajectory had not been developed. The American sailor gunners, though, were always at home sighting Long Tom. They had a marvellous facility in using this ponderous artillery, which usually carried a thirty-two pound ball. There were fours and sixes at hand also. The gun crews were happy when a real brush with pirates came their way, for they warmed to the precision of their work.

The pirates of the eighteenth century were brave enough, especially when they were attacking a vessel inferior to theirs, but they lacked that deadly efficiency in gunnery which distinguished the Americans. Whether the gun crews were fighting the French picaroon, the Spanish buccaneer or the Chinese pirates they were entirely in their element. What with the splendid seamanship and deadly fire they gave very good accounts of themselves.

The sailors of the time were skilled also in the use of the cutlass and of the pistol. Often the luggers of the pirates would come up under the cover of the smoke of gunpowder, hold to the attacked craft with grappling hooks and swarm aboard. Half naked savages with knives in their teeth sticking their fierce visages over the rail were enough to make the stoutest heart quail. The American sailors of our merchantmen cut at the turbaned heads with the swinging blades. The command to "repel boarders" did not find them slothful in business.

The American ships of the early days were rich prizes. They carried out valuable cargoes and often great quantities of specie with which to buy cargoes in the Orient if the captains could not negotiate for return freight on other terms.

When the War of the Revolution broke out the armed merchantmen of the colonies became formidable foes of British shipping. Few realize the important part played by these vessels in capturing and destroying the commerce of Great Britain. Operations were carried directly to the British coasts. The exploits of Capt. John Paul Jones, whose forty gun flagship Le Bonhomme Richard was really an East Indiaman formerly known as Le Duras, show the boldness and the skill of men he had trained in the young American navy.

John Paul Jones was, as far as his training was concerned, a product of the British merchant marine in the days when the great sailing ships went to the tropic seas in quest of rich cargoes. The fighting of ships was part of the duty of the officers. Some of the craft engaged in trade were so well provided with heavy cannon that they were frequently topheavy. Many a gallant vessel was lost in the storms because of her unwieldy yet necessary artillery.

When Salem was on the crest of the wave there were owned there some of the finest ships afloat, fully comparable to the best of the English craft in her India trade. They were fitted out as privateers with the outbreak of the American Revolution, and many of them not only continued to run the British blockade but also took sharp reprisals on British commerce. The gunners had little experience before they went to sea, but the owners provided liberal quantities of gunpowder for practice purposes. The gunners of the American ships were much more proficient than were those of the British vessels of the period on that account.

When Congress gave to many of the ships commissions as privateers encounters between them and the British sloops of war were frequent. One of the most noted of these vessels was the Grand Turk, which had been successfully operated as a merchant vessel. With little change of crew and of armament she was soon ready for battle.

The hostilities between the United States and France at the close of the eighteenth century resulted in many an encounter between our armed merchantment and the French privateers. In the Essex Institute there is a painting of the encounter between the Mount Vernon and a French privateer. The Mount Vernon was owned by Elias Hasket Derby, a member of one of the old shipholding families of the American Venice. An account of the fight is recorded in a letter from Mr. Derby reproduced in a recent number of *Shipping Illustrated* of this city.

Capt. Derby while he was in Naples shortly before trying conclusions with the Frenchman had been the guest of Lord Nelson. He had entertained distinguished company too in his own cabin.

He writes of the manœuvring of a craft which he supposed to be British but which later hoisted the tricolor and fired a broadside at the Mount Vernon.

"We immediately brought our ship to the wind," continues the captain, "and stood on about a mile. We wore toward the centre of the fleet; hove about and crossed him on the other tack and received his broadside. Several of his shot fell on board of us and cut our sails, two round shots striking us without much damage. All hands were active in clearing ship for action, for our surprise had been complete. In about ten minutes we commenced firing our stern chasers and in a quarter of an hour gave him our broadside in such style as evidently sickened him. He immediately luffed in the wind, gave us his broadside, went in stays in great confusion, wore ship afterward in a large circle and renewed the chase at a mile and a half distance, a manœuvre calculated to keep up appearances with the fleet and to escape our shot. We received seven or eight broadsides from him, and I was mortified at not having it in my power to return him an equal number without exposing myself to the rest of the fleet, for I am persuaded I should have had the pleasure of sending him home had he been separate from them. At midnight we had distanced them, the chasing rocket signals being almost out of sight, and soon left them. We then kept ourselves in constant preparation till my arrival here, and indeed it has been requisite, for we have been in constant brushes ever since.

The next morning occurred the action with the lateener. The letter continues: "He came so near our broadside as to allow our six pound grape to do execution handsomely. We then bore away and gave him our stern guns in a cool and deliberate manner. Our bars having cut his sails considerably he was thrown into confusion and struck both his ensign and his pennant. I was puzzled to know what to do with so many men. Our ship was running large, with all her steering sails out, so that we could not immediately bring her to the wind. I had reason to fear that the Frenchman might receive assistance. Gibraltar was in full view. These circumstances induced me to give up the gratification of bringing him in. It was, however, a satisfaction to flog the rascal in full view of the English fleet. * * * The risk of sending here is great indeed, for any ship short of our force in men and guns—particularly heavy guns. * * * You need have but little apprehension for my safety, as my crew are remarkably well trained and are perfectly well disposed to defend themselves, and I think after having cleared ourselves of the French in such a handsome manner you may well conclude that we can effect almost anything."

The war with the Barbary States was the outcome of a long established custom of those half civilized communities which for years levied on the commerce of all nations. They had often been subsidized by one nation against another and had shared loot with countries which had a high name in the world. The American ships of the merchant marine had suffered from these marauders, but they had at times done deadly execution. The decision of the United States to have millions for defence but not one cent for tribute brought matters to a crisis with Tunis and Tripoli, and the young American navy gave summary punishment.

The war of 1812 again revealed the efficiency of the discipline and the gunnery of the American merchant marine. One of the first vessels to enter the Government service was the Grand Turk, then an old vessel but speedy and well handled. She took many a British prize before the treaty of Ghent was signed. The successes of the American arms on land were inconsiderable, but on the seas the commerce of England had been greatly harassed and she was glad to be rid of the hornetlike cruisers.

There came a golden age for American shipping in the years following the making of peace with England. The fame of the Yankee skippers had spread to all the world and the Stars and Stripes, once looked upon with suspicion, was welcomed everywhere. The trim packets and clippers were well appointed and well armed. The robbers of the Spanish Main, of the Gulf of Mexico and the African coasts were extinct before many years, yet for decades to come the Oriental waters were infested by the Chinese pirates.

The merchantmen always went armed to those waters. In fact it was not until about 1877 that this practice went out of vogue. The heavy armaments of the merchant vessels in the Eastern trade were gradually eliminated. The vessels were painted to resemble frigates and the broad white stripe on the hull was broken by what appeared to be gun ports. They were blank spaces merely, yet at a distance they had a truculent appearance, enough to convince the ocean thieves that there was a formidable force on board. To this day many of the fittings of sailing ships which still remain in world's carrying trade suggest the days of iron.

Occasionally there may be seen on the deck of an old time tea ship a small cannon, relic of a stirring period in our national history. Often in the cabins are racks of rifles and cutlasses and old fashioned pistols, polished and business like, as though intended for instant use.

The civil war in this country did much to demonstrate the ease with which merchantmen can be converted into vessels of war. Privateers and blockade runners of all kinds took their chances. Many a family in the West Indies now enjoying large incomes founded its fortunes on the ability of the skippers of the vessels they owned not only to show a neat pair of heels but, if need be, to fight the pursuer. The Spanish-American war saw the utilization of many commercial vessels in the naval service of the United States.

The early days of the European war were attended by much discussion as to the right of merchant vessels to carry arms. Craft belonging to belligerent countries came into this and other ports with formidable guns ostensibly for purposes of defence. These craft were finally permitted to go in and out by the customs authorities.

The French steamship Rochambeau is credited with being the first of the foreign merchant fleet to enter this port armed. She is carrying a 75 millimeter gun mounted aft which can hurl a fourteen and a half pound projectile a distance of 16,000 yards.

The Verdi, an Italian liner, came in from Sandy Hook one morning with an admirable 3 inch gun which was a nine days wonder. One of the Royal Mail steamers followed her example. As these craft belong to belligerents they are considered as in effect vessels of war. One of them the other day on her arrival reported that her gunner had sunk a German U-boat with a single shot.

As such their commanders consider that they have a perfect right either to ram the German submarines or to fire at them the moment a periscope appears. The Germans executed a British captain on the ground that while in command of his vessel he had attempted to ram a German submarine which had approached him.

The status of American vessels effectively armed for defence will engage the attention of the authorities for many a day. Under the old law they are permitted to carry only one gun for defensive purposes, and that so arranged that it is not available for offence. The German and Austrian view is that such vessels would themselves be in the category of pirates, because they belong to a nation which is not an enemy of the Central Powers. The commanders of these vessels would under the arrangement proposed have no commission from the Government of the United States. It is suggested that their military status be more clearly defined. Whatever the outcome of the movement for the arming of American merchant ships may be, there can be little doubt that in the event of their having to defend themselves the traditions of the marine of old will be well maintained.

THE ROCHAMBEAU AS SHE SAILED FOR FRANCE WITH RESERVISTS

© American Press Assn.

A FIGHT WITH PIRATES ON THE HIGH SEAS. From a Painting by Bernard F. Gribble.

THE WAITERS MART.

RAIN or shine about twenty-five shabbily dressed men congregate every morning except Sunday between 10:30 and 11:30 o'clock on Nassau street, between Fulton and Ann. They stand in groups of four and five. They do not talk about the war or the high cost of food or any other popular topic of the day. What they are mostly concerned about is whether or not they will get work.

These job hunters are waiters, dishwashers and kitchen men. For twenty years the Nassau street block has been the meeting place of men who sought work as restaurant helpers. An elderly man was distinguished in one of the groups and interviewed.

"Why are all these men hanging around here?" the observer asked curiously.

"They are waiting for work as waiters, dishwashers and kitchen men," he said. "When any of the restaurants in the section are short handed they know where to get the men. In nearly all cases the work is just for the afternoon, because it may happen simply that some waiters or dishwashers or kitchen men have stayed away for a day. And we men are employed as substitutes. Sometimes some of us are fortunate enough to land permanent jobs, but that is very seldom."

The elderly man went on further to say that the selection of that particular spot was due to the fact that there were more lunchrooms in Nassau, Fulton and Ann streets about twenty years ago than in any other three downtown streets. At present the lunchrooms in that vicinity are as numerous as in any other section of downtown.